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ABSTRACT

A one-week, five-hour course in survival Spanish taught at an Elderhostel at Winthrop College included in its content the process of introductions and courtesy expressions, numbers and counting, telling time, days of the week, months, seasons, colors, cognates for describing people, talking about jobs and hobbies, verb forms for questions and answers, selected phrases for arriving in a Spanish-speaking country and traveling there, and suggestions for continuing the language learning process. All instruction was done in Spanish, with little emphasis on points of grammar. Student motivation was high, but limited contact and study time had to be considered in the learning process. Adult student characteristics that differ from those of traditional students and affected teaching techniques included a preference for handouts, hesitation to speak in class, concern more for correctness than communication, and hearing and vision problems. A review of recent literature on teaching and learning strategies of older adults is recommended, including research on differential communication and learning motivations, reduction of course content, change in the balance of grammar and vocabulary in instructional materials, and native reactions to language errors. (MSE)

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Teaching Foreign Languages to the Older Learner

Joseph W. Zdenek

Probably every one of you readers of this article has had adult learners in your regular language classrooms, and if you've taught continuing education courses in foreign language you've had only adult learners. The young adults who have for many years been our typical undergraduate students have begun to see their ranks invaded by older adults who have decided to enter or to return to college. In 1973-74, for example, the college going population over the age of 21 increased by 81% over the previous year; in 1975, at least 1 of 3 students pursuing a college degree was over 25; in 1977 40% of college students were over 21. This trend will probably continue as the number of 18 year olds bottoms out in the 90's when there will be 26% fewer than in the late 70's.[1] Therefore, we foreign language teachers are facing more and more frequently differently constituted classes that may call for different strategies, different emphases and even different methodologies.

My experience with older learners goes back to the late 50's when I supplemented my meager high school salary by teaching adult evening courses (the term "continuing education" had not yet been invented or at least I was not aware of it) called conversational Spanish or French to a group of students different from the ones I faced all day long. One of my best students was over 90 years old. It was a rewarding experience, and in spite of the fact I knew very little about FL learning and acquisition among adults I thought I did a fine job, and the classes did, too, because I always had groups who wanted to continue their conversational classes beyond the offerings of the program. Later when I began to teach on the college level, I always had a smattering of older students. For several years, I taught in an Elderhostel program a very short (one week) course called "Survival Spanish" to retired persons. I designed the course using my own experience and pirating materials from various sources and again I felt I did a good job. All this experience, however, took place without any theoretical underpinnings, simply

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because there wasn't much available at the time. Research into the older learner is fairly recent and much research yet remains to be done. What I plan to do in this article is discuss briefly the content of the course I taught. I also want to present some of the research findings which supported, fortunately, some of the things I did in class, and other research findings which have caused me to plan to modify my course content and strategies the next time I have older learners. I should also like to draw from my experiences in teaching older learners in short courses designed for communication in order to suggest making modifications and making choices from an overly huge corpus of material in basic language skill courses for younger learners.

In the three groups I taught in the Elderhostel programs at Winthrop College in Rock Hill, South Carolina, I found the students, who ranged in age from 60 to 83, alert, highly-motivated, very receptive, very active and never "old".

"Survival Spanish" is a five hour course, meeting one hour a day for one week. It, of necessity, must have a skeletal framework. No text was used; materials were pirated from a number of sources and distributed in ditto form. Older people are very book oriented, and although the whole hour was devoted to oral work and communicative activities, the students always had dittoed materials to refer to and to study before the next class met. The first time I taught the course I had prepared many transparencies, highly recommended visual stimuli, of course, for almost any other level, but they were a dismal failure for Elderhostel students, simply because many could not see that well at a distance! I learned very quickly to flash up a transparency and to provide a ditto at the same time in order to introduce new material. I also used, rather than a blackboard, which nowadays is frequently green and difficult to read, large sheets of paper and black felt pens. The following is a syllabus of the one-week course:

day 1: introduction with related amenities, selected courtesy expressions
day 2: numbers; counting; time telling; days of the week; seasons; months; colors
day 3: cognates for describing friends, spouses, classmates; talking about jobs, hobbies; first person forms of hablar, comer, vivir, and ir for questions and answers
day 4: selected phrases for arriving in a Spanish speaking country and getting around in the country
day 5: recapitulation of days 1-4; a few comments on how to continue the learning process

The class began with an introduction of myself with "Mi nombre es. . .", instead of the usual, more difficult "Me llamo. . .", followed by "¿Su nombre, por favor?", requiring each student to introduce himself. In this way the members of the class got to know each other in a few minutes. Questioning followed, using cognates and comprehensible expressions such as "Soy residente de. . .": "¿Es usted residente de. . . ?", "Soy de. . .": "¿Es usted de. . . ?", etc. Introductions were then practiced with various courtesy expressions: "encantado", "mucho gusto", etc. Other amenidades ("buenos días" "buenas tardes", "hola", "¿qué tal?", "¿cómo está Vd?", "bien, gracias", "¿y usted?", "hasta luego", "hasta mañana", etc.) were also taught and practiced between the instructor and individuals and with pairs of students until they felt comfortable starting up a conversation, introducing themselves and communicating on a very limit[illegible]evel.

On the second day, after reviewing and practicing introductions, asking questions of the students ("Ah, Usted es residente de Miami ¿verdad?"), and getting the students to ask questions of each other using the material of day one, we practiced numbers by sets, adding, subtracting, multiplying, calculating peso and peseta equivalencies, telling time and asking about events ("¿A qué hora es. . . ?"). The number system was explained beyond 1000 for recognition, comprehension and decoding primarily. Days of the week, months, and seasons were introduced and practiced by using them in combination with numbers ("¿Cuántos días hay en . . ?"; " Cuántas horas para ir a Miami?"; etc.) and through general questioning ("¿Qué día es mañana?", "¿En qué día es la fiesta?", "¿En qué mes es su cumpleaños?", "¿En qué mes hay vacaciones?", etc.). Weather conditions were presented and practiced with days, months, and the place of origin of the

participants. Finally, objects in the room and articles of clothing were described by color, and personalized questions required the students to describe themselves and each other.

The material taught on the third day proved to be the most productive for communication purposes. Using cognate adjectives such as "idealista", "romántico", "conservador", "liberal", "independiente", "generoso", etc., questions were asked of the students who were able to talk about themselves, their spouses and their friends. Using cognates such as "importante", "necesario", "indispensable", "educación", "matrimonio", "divorcio", etc., they were able to express opinions on several topics. Cognates such as "profesor", "dentista", "demócrata", "actor", "artista", "piloto", "millonario", etc. led to all kinds of biographical information.

Work with "hablar", "comer", and "vivir", in first and third persons led to supplying information for such questions as:

"¿Habla usted mucho por teléfono?"
"¿Habla mucho con su hijo?"
"¿Come frecuentemente en restaurantes (en casa)?"
"¿A qué hora come Vd?"
"¿Come mucha proteína (vitaminas, vegetables)?"
"¿Vive en una ciudad (un pueblo, una casa, un apartamento, en el norte, este)?"

Work with "ir", again first and third persons, led to discussion about that evening's activities, the activities planned for the remainder of the week or general activities.

"¿Va frecuentemente al cine (a la ópera)?"
"¿Va a la película (conferencia, fiesta)?" etc.;
"¿Qué días va. . . ?"

The material taught on the fourth day, since it was presented in the form of several pages of phrases to be memorized, could not, of course, be learned well enough for complete recall on the next and last day. These phrases were introduced to serve as a basis for additional study after the course was over. All the phrases were practiced for correct pronunciation and manipulated with substitutions and variants, pulling in the material learned during the first three days and recombining. The expressions were

categorized in the following way and presented with their English equivalents:

arrival in the country
traveling by plane
traveling by bus
getting lodging
asking directions
changing money
ordering meals

From two to twelve expressions were presented in each category. Then copies of several types of menus were distributed. One was from a better restaurant (3 forks) where a menu is typically bi- or tri-lingual. The other was from a smaller restaurant where there are no translations supplied. The "menú del día" was explained as well as how to order from such a menu. Numbers, referring to quantity and to money, were practiced with the menu ("una botella de vino tinto"; "tres tés y un café"; "¿cuánto es la especialidad del día?/el menú del día"; etc.). All expressions were practiced in situations ("O.K., Mrs. Allen, you've arrived at the ticket office. How do you go about getting a bus ticket to Valladolid? What do you say?" or "How do you tell the taxi driver to take you to your hotel?" or "How do you ask for a single room with bath?" or "How do you ask for the bill?" or "How do you ask directions to the museum?" or "How do you ask for more bread?" The situational cues were given quickly in English but required Spanish rejoinders.

On the fifth and last day we reviewed all the material through repetition, questioning, counting; through introductions; through situations this time in Spanish ("Usted quiere ir al museo de antropología. ¿Qué dice Vd.?"); and quick-fire translations ("¿Cómo se dice? bath, single room, I need a doctor). Students left the class with a collection of handouts which could be used for future review and study.

The last few minutes of the class were spent on some suggestions for continuing Spanish study, materials available for tourists and travelers and other kinds of materials for those who wished to go beyond "survival" Spanish into more formalized study.

The primary objective of "Survival Spanish" was to introduce students to the basic sound system and a limited number of basic structures and vocabulary items, in order to survive, all of these things being, however, building blocks for additional review, study and further expansion.

From the first moment of day one, Spanish was used for all communication purposes. There was virtually no explanation of the verbal system or any other points of grammar. The students were led to use the correct forms through listening and performing. Questions about grammar, usually asked by those who had some knowledge of Spanish and who wanted to show their knowledge off, were discouraged by the tight time frame and by keeping the students constantly manipulating the language and by learning by doing. Certain questions were answered after class for the more curious. I find older students very disposed to chatting and chattering. Keeping them busy minimized these temptations. Each day began with a review of the last day's material and each day ended with a review of that hour's material through personalized communication activities. The format was review-preview-view-review.

Pronunciation was taught through repetition and practice of vocabulary items and phrases. There were no pronunciation drills. There was no pattern practice. There was no writing. Reading was limited entirely to the vocabulary items, expressions and phrases practiced orally and reproduced in ditto form for the students.

Adult learners who attend Elderhostel generally are well motivated but have a limited amount of contact time in class and a limited amount of time outside of class because of the other classes they are taking and the activities that are designed to fill up their afternoons and evenings. This is probably true for most adult evening courses, too. Older learners are very much oriented to the printed word. Hence, they appreciate handouts to study from. They are more hesitant to speak and more concerned about correctness than with communication. Hearing and sight problems sometimes limit learning through audio-visual modalities. As I pointed out earlier, research on adult learners has

been especially abundant in the last few years as college populations have been changing and more and more centers for continuing education are being established. It might be well for teachers of adult learners to acquaint themselves with some of the literature available to them.

A review of available instructional material led Benseler and Schulz in 1980 to conclude that "most college foreign language programs apparently utilized a modified audiolingual approach with emphasis on the development of all four language skills."[2] Some of the basic texts of this method should be reconsidered with the older learner in mind. Recitation of memorized material, for example, will add to the anxiety and fear of the older learner, since they are more concerned with correctness than with communication, and one can well imagine that assuming the role of a teenager will not go over well with a 60 year old grandmother.[3] In a 1964 article Ausubel listed as inappropriate for adults "the rote learning of phrases, inductive learning of grammar, avoidance of the native language, the prior presentation of materials in spoken form, . . and the 'natural speed rendition' of the second language".[4] According to Joiner, the modified audio lingual method prevalent in higher education today will be successful with nontraditional students, i.e., older students, to the extent that these modifications include procedures that enhance meaningfulness, bring into play older learners' ability to learn through analysis, encourage adults to draw upon their extensive language vocabulary, maintain an equal balance among the four skills and minimize near-native pronunciation and speed of delivery.[5] Some of these modifications, of course, bring this method closer to the cognitive method.

Andragogy differs from pedagogy in terms of self-concept, experience, readiness, and learning orientation of the learner. Older students will be more independent and self-directed; they will have a rich store of experience that should be tapped by the teacher; their readiness for learning may have more to do with the requirements of their roles in real life than with biological and social development; and their learning

orientation is centered on current problems and immediate application of learned skills.[6]

Because of differences in learning strategies between adults and children, pointed out by some studies done by Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle, it is clear that there must be also differences in learning situations for affective acquisition. One of the essential aspects of motivating adults is through the communication aspect of language. In other words a student organizes his learning (and therefore the teacher his teaching) around capabilities of doing certain things with the target language (asking permission, inviting, advising, requesting services, etc.) much in the same way he does things in his native language. For example, a speaker is aware he needs to apologize and marshalls his linguistic resources for this purpose.[7] This relates to the functional-notional syllabus for language learning.

ETS program administrator Charles W. Stansfield states that "Going back to childhood is the underlying theme of most of the new methodologies" but warns that "Adults don't learn the same way children do. They tend to want to intellectualize. Although teaching should be conversationally oriented, adults will want to know the grammatical rules as well."[8] They learn concepts a bit more slowly but probably better than younger learners. They are usually quite hesitant to speak, slower to react and more concerned about correctness than with communication, i.e., with form rather than content.

A course such as the one described here, because of its short length, requires the elimination of big chunks of material (all extensive formal verb study, most possessive forms, indirect and direct object pronouns, position of adjectives, comparisons and superlatives, to name a few) and many items which I call peripheral, even for regular classes.

Besides offering the foreign language instructor the opportunity to teach a small group of interested, highly motivated and very appreciative students (not always found in other educational settings), the teaching of such a course has a very particular value.

Deciding what to include and what to omit should make one question the validity, in regular college or high-school classes, of being bound by the text.

The literature of FL instruction contains many articles that advocate a reduction in content. Tracy D. Terrell has suggested that the pedagogical corpus, particularly verb tense forms, be reduced during FL acquisition. He argues that the complete system of verb morphology usually presented in most elementary texts is not essential for communication and not possible for beginning students to incorporate into their developing grammatical systems.[9] This is not new news, since W. Bull in 1947 made a study which showed that only five verb paradigms (present, infinitive, preterite, imperfect, gerund) account for over 77% of all verb forms used in a wide range of written Spanish.[10]

William I. Miller in an even more recent article[11] stresses the point that most textbooks do not order the material according to communicative criteria; the student is likely to learn many items of little use and not have covered more useful ones. He comments on the reduction of thirteen tenses; the avoidance of the second person imperative ("cállate") by using substitutes such as "quieres callarte", and "favor de callarte"; the reduction of the subjunctive corpus through elimination of its use after verbs of denial and in adjective clauses since the ideas expressed thereby occur less frequently and after verbs of emotion where many Spanish speakers do not use the subjunctive at all; and the reduction of variants in the whole system. He states the common experience of linguists and travelers is that they can perform far more effectively in the language if they have learned a little grammar and an extensive vocabulary rather than a lot of grammar with little practical vocabulary.[12]

Interesting research has also been done on how natives react to language errors committed by others and their level of tolerance toward communication efforts of American students.[13] What this research points out is that native speakers of different languages react differently, and what turns off a Frenchman will not turn off a Spaniard and vice-versa. When Henry Higgins said "The French don't care what they do actually,

as long as they pronounce correctly", he was wrong, according to one study which indicates that while an American accent and some Anglicisms may be moderately tolerable, American speakers of French should be most concerned that they speak with the greatest possible grammatical accuracy.[14] Errors in tense usage are not as important as errors in verb forms and pronouns.[15] In Spanish, however, communication is impeded by continuous misuse of the imperfect versus the preterite[16] and prepositions. Native speakers, for example, find not using an infinitive after a preposition and not using "estar" in the progressive much more objectionable than the incorrect use of the relative pronouns or the subjunctive. Some items we frequently drill but which are most acceptable are the omission of the definite article with gustar and with days of the week and the omission of the indirect object pronoun. Miller supports Chastain's earlier study which shows that comprehension is most severely limited by word usage; the forms of words are less important than the correct use of words.[17] All of these studies should make us question the essentialness of normally taught items in Spanish such as

(1) the spelling of numbers (numbers are rarely spelled out in real-life situations
(2) verb tenses such as the future perfect (rarely used) and the past perfect (can be replaced in most situations by the preterite), even the future (when a periphrastic construction with "ir a," "pensar", "querer" will serve as well); the preterite perfect
(3) the names of the letters of the alphabet (only useful if you spell out loud)
(4) the diminutives (is it "illo", "ito", "ecillo", "ecito" and in what country?)
(5) augmentative forms
(6) vosotros forms
(7) the names of the inhabitants of 20 Spanish speaking countries (showing origin by means of "ser de" is perfectly acceptable for communication purposes; "es de Nicaragua" is more manageable than "es nicaraguense")
(8) distinction between possessive pronouns and possessive adjectives
(9) the ordinals beyond "fifth" and
(10) dozens, if not hundreds, of esoteric vocabulary items.

Yet in some new editions of commonly used textbooks, some of these very items are being added. In short, there is plenty of room for paring down. We could easily arrive at a similar list for French.

A short course for adult learners forces the instructor to make some decisions about the methodology and strategies for presenting the material. An even more valuable outcome of teaching such a course are the decisions that must be made concerning course content in order to reduce the "cognitive overload" of the students, something we might all keep in mind, in my opinion, in all our courses, especially in the beginning and intermediate levels.

[1]Joiner, Elizabeth G., "The Older Foreign Language Learner: A Challenge for Colleges and Universities," Language in Education: Theory and Practice (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1981), 2-3.

[2]Benseler, David & Renate A. Schulz, "Methodological Trends in College Foreign Language Instruction," MLJ, 64 (1980); p. 93.

[3]Joiner, p. 25.

[4]Ausubel, David, "Adults Versus Children in Second Language Learning," MLJ, 48 (1964), p. 420.

[5]Joiner, 25-26.

[6]Vacca, Richard & James Walker, "Andragogy: The Missing Link in College Reading Programs," Lifelong Learning, 3 (1980), p. 24.

[7]Rehorick, Sally, "Second Language Acquisition in Adults: Some Methodological Implications for the University Educator," FR, 56 (May 1983), 822-23.

[8]"Foreign Languages in the Schools," Focus, 12 (1983), p. 10.

[9]Terrell, Tracy D., "A Natural Approach to the Teaching of Verb Form and Functions in Spanish," FLA, 13 (1980), p. 129.

[10]Bull, William, "Modern Spanish Verb Form Frequencies," Hispania, 30 (1974), 451-66.

[11]Miller, William I., "The Scope of a Spanish Grammar for Minimal Communicative Competence," FL Annals, 11 (February 1984), 47-53.

[12]Miller, p. 51.

[13]See Kenneth Chastain, "Native Speaker Reactions to Instructor-Identified Student Second-Language Errors," MLJ 64 (summer 1980), 210-15; Kathleen Y. Ensz, "French Attitudes toward Speech Errors of American Speakers of French," MLJ 66 (summer 1982), 133-139; Linda G. Piazza, "French Tolerance for Grammatical Errors Made by Americans," MLJ 64 (winter 1980), 422-427; Vicki B. Galloway, "Perceptions of the Communicative Efforts of American Students of Spanish," MLJ (winter 1980), 428-433.

[14]Ensz, p. 133.

[15]Piazza, p. 424.

[16]Galloway, p. 432.

[17]Chastain, p. 214.